

Spring 2016

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Deaf or [insert ethnicity here]? The impact of South African
Sign Language and Deaf community membership on the
ethnic identities of three Deaf students in Cape Town

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South Africa: Cape Town
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for South Africa:
Multiculturalism and Human Rights, SIT Study Abroad

Spring 2016

Abstract

South African Sign Language (SASL) is the language used by most members of the Deaf community in South Africa. SASL, much like other signed languages, has a long history of development, acceptance, and non-acceptance. The history of SASL is undeniably intertwined and affected by the political history of South Africa. This article examines the relationship between ethnicity, language, and identity in the context of South African Sign Language and the Deaf community. It seeks to understand how the use of South African Sign Language as one's main language affects one's identity and their identification with their racial group. The article looks at the perspectives and stories of individual members of the Deaf community in Cape Town to come to a conclusion about the initial question: Does regular use of South African Sign Language and membership in the Deaf community affect one's identity with a racial or ethnic group?

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge a few people for helping me throughout this research and writing process. I want to first thank my advisor, Emma McKinney, for providing me with invaluable insight and guidance with my topic of study. I would also like to thank Emma Arogundade for the support and encouragement through the research process. I also must thank Stewart Chirova, my academic director, for his calm leadership for all of us through this Independent Study Project. I also want to thank the staff and students of SIT Cape Town for being an incredible support system. Finally I have to thank my interviewees, interpreter, and the entire Deaf community in Cape Town for entertaining my curiosity and sharing their stories.

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Introduction

This article examines the intersections of language, race/ethnicity, and identity through the lens of South African Sign Language (SASL) and the Deaf community in Cape Town. It explores how SASL, as a main method of communication, operates as an identity shaper for some Deaf individuals. This project looks at how the language is a means for membership within the Deaf community and how membership in this community can influence and work with Deaf individuals' other identities, particularly racial and ethnic identity. It also explores how the Deaf community, and the people in it, having a strong connection to South African Sign Language is alike or different to racial/ethnic groups in South Africa having a strong connection with their language. The research takes place in the area around Cape Town, South Africa. In this article we ask: Does use of SASL and identity within the Deaf community impact how one identifies with their racial or ethnic group?

Throughout this paper I use the word “deaf” in two different ways. There are two different meanings to the word and they rest on the capitalization (or not) of the first letter. When written with a lowercase “d”, “deaf” is referring solely to the medical loss of hearing. To be lowercase “d” deaf you just must have hearing loss. “Deaf” with a capital “D” refers to Deafness from a sociocultural point of view. It is “Deaf” as an identity and community with cultural norms and a language (South African Sign Language). Most of this paper refers to capital “D” Deaf as it talks primarily about sign language and identity.

From what I have heard and seen, in South Africa, language and race are very much intertwined. Racial or ethnic groups often have a language associated with them. It seems that many South Africans identify strongly with their mother tongue. Given the political history of South Africa, language, in association with race, can be a huge divider among people. With all of this in mind I was thinking about other languages used in South Africa and sign language and the Deaf community crossed my mind. People of all races can be deaf and membership within the Deaf community rests largely on using sign language. I wondered how identity with the Deaf community and South African Sign Language (SASL) affects one's ethnic identity. Does one's identity as a Deaf individual trump one's identity as a Xhosa person, for example? If it does, is it because of the language most used? These are the questions that began popping into my head.

Deaf people have always existed and have always found ways to communicate with one another. Sign languages exist because of this. In South Africa, sign language has gone through different levels of acceptance by mainstream society. In 1863 South Africa's first school for the deaf was established in Cape Town. It was called Dominican Grimley Institute. This school was for deaf students of any race, and sign language was its main method of instruction (Aarons 1998). By 1920, Dominican Grimley began separating students based on method of instruction. The methods were oralism (using lip reading and speech), which was favored at the time, or manualism (using signing systems). This separation was racial because almost all white students were taught using oralism, the method seen as superior, and almost all students using manualism were students of color. (Aarons 1998). Various other schools for the

deaf were created but most did not use an official sign language. Sometimes the schools used systems of signs but they were based on the oral language of instruction. Because the schools brought groups of deaf people together, the students created their own sign languages. This was part of the formation of today's South African Sign Language. In present day South Africa there are still schools that strongly prefer oralism to the use of sign language. Dominican Grimley is one such school (Dominican-Grimley). However, hundreds of thousands of South Africans use South African Sign Language on a daily basis (Aarons 1998). There is a growing and thriving Deaf community.

As a speech-language pathology and audiology student, language and deafness are things that I learn about and think about a lot. In the future it is likely that I will encounter Deaf individuals in my work and I will definitely continuously study language. This is why this topic interests me. Thinking about language and the Deaf community in conjunction with multiculturalism and human rights brought me to this topic. Hopefully by the end of my research I will come to have a greater understanding of how regular use of South African Sign Language impacts (or does not impact) one's racial identity and overall identities.

Literature Review

There is not a huge wealth of research out there about South African Sign Language (SASL) and the Deaf community in South Africa but there are a few interesting pieces. I hope that this project will add to the existing research in some way. Much of the previous research that I have found centers on education and the Deaf community. There is also some research on accessibility and disability rights that touches on the Deaf community and SASL.

The history of deaf education has had its share of issues. Dissenting views and problematic policies shape the history of the ways deaf individuals were educated. The education of the deaf population in South Africa was very divided (Aarons 1998, Regan 2006). This system of education created divisions that still exist in the Deaf community today. In the introduction to this paper, a brief history of education for deaf individuals was given. For the most part, all of the articles I found agreed on the keys points of the history but the way the history is interpreted varies greatly. In the beginning of 1983, a conference was held in Pretoria about sign language and education in South Africa. At this conference the South African Sign Language Research Programme (SASLRP) was developed (Reagan 2006). The main job of the SASLRP was to create a dictionary of the signs that Deaf South Africans use (Reagan 2006). It compiled different signs that Deaf individuals from different areas use for each particular word (Aarons 1998). The use and credibility of this dictionary, called the *Dictionary of Southern African signs*, is contested. Some see the dictionary as a positive, important contribution and some see it quite negatively. In a paper by Aarons and Akach, "South African Sign Language-one language or many? A sociolinguistic question.", the dictionary is spoken of negatively. It is written about as if it was a project really aimed at making signed versions of a spoken language. The dictionary was mostly vocabulary and lacked the complexities of SASL like syntax and morphology (Aarons 1998). It was apparently a very pared down version of the signed language(s) used at the time in South Africa (Aarons 1998). The article, "From policy to practice: sign language developments in post-apartheid South Africa" by Reagan, Penn, and Ogilvy speaks highly of the dictionary. They maintain that the *Dictionary of Southern African Signs* had a

strong positive effect on the changes happening for the Deaf community in the 1980's (Reagan 2006). The Reagan article seems to promote the dictionary while that Aarons article problematizes it as coming too much from the perspective of hearing people. There have always been, and still are, very polar viewpoints about deafness. There are clashes of opinion about deaf education, language, and communication in general.

As in all “differently-abled” communities, accessibility is something to consider for the Deaf community. There is already existing research that highlights the pitfalls in accessibility for deaf individuals. The plights of Deaf individuals in South Africa are a part of a larger problem (Heap 2009, Haricharan 2013, Glaser 2004). The rights of South Africans with (dis)abilities are not being met in actuality. The South African constitution “protects” the rights of people with (dis)abilities in policy but in practice, rights are being violated (Heap 2009). Quality of education for deaf individuals is poor, unemployment rates in the Deaf community are high, and access to healthcare is limited by language barriers (Glaser 2004, Haricharan 2013). Interpreters are rarely available in healthcare settings and because of this the rights of Deaf individuals to healthcare may be being violated (Haricharan 2013). The article “‘We’ve moved away from disability as a health issue, it’s a human rights issue’: reflecting on 10 years of the right to equality in South Africa” by Heap, Lorenzo, and Thomas states, “There are only six accredited professional SASL interpreters for the entire country (Heap and Morgans 2006). The lack of professional interpreters is a major barrier to public services, including justice (Morgan 2001), health and healthcare (Heap et al. 2006).” (Heap 2009). The number of accredited interpreters has since grown

to a total of seven accredited interpreters (SASLINC). This number is grossly low. Perhaps the hardships faced by the Deaf community are a reason for the strong sense of identity that many Deaf individuals hold. This sense of identity is explored in this research.

As stated in the introduction, there are two different ways to view deafness. There is the medical view, which is noted by using a lowercase “d” in “deaf”. This refers to deafness simply as hearing loss. Capital “D” Deaf refers to deafness from a cultural standpoint. It refers to “Deaf” as an identity and the Deaf community as a sociocultural group. The Deaf community has certain conditions for membership (Rose 1995). The article, “Intergroup relations: political action and identity in the deaf community” by P. Rose and G. Kiger states, “In deaf culture, there are criteria for membership, such as attendance at a residential school for the deaf, use of sign language, attitude about one’s deafness, and so forth” (Rose 1995, pg. 526). These conditions, as well as others, form the basis of Deaf community membership and identity.

Unlike most of the previous research on SASL and the Deaf community, this research looks at the SASL and Deafness as an identity that intersects with one’s other identities. It asks questions of ethnic and racial identity as well as confronting Deaf identity and language identity. In this article, Deaf identities are contrasted with ethnic identities while the article, “Can we talk about the right to healthcare without language? A critique of key international human rights law, drawing on the experiences of a Deaf woman in Cape Town, South Africa” by Haricharan, Heap, Coomans and London draws connections between the Deaf community and other minority language groups (often oppressed ethnic groups)

(Haricharan 2013). In this study I use previous research as a jumping point to ask questions that have not yet been asked in the hopes that it will bring greater understanding of South African Sign Language and the community that uses it.

Methodology

The research methods used in this project include both structured and unstructured interview and a written identity ranking activity. The interviews were done on a one-on-one basis in a small room at a local university. Some interviews were done in South African Sign Language through an interpreter and some were done in spoken English. The interviewee chose the language of interview. Most of the contact that I made with potential research participant was through email excluding one time where I visited an organization in person to get in contact with the director.

Communication during the research process

Throughout the research process of this project I realized how many barriers exist for communication between a hearing person with no knowledge of SASL, like myself, and an SASL-using member of the Deaf community. The world is set up for hearing people and some of the ways of communicating that I, as a hearing person, have the privilege of using effortlessly are inaccessible for a Deaf individual. Many of the methods that I would first think of to contact organizations and people for interviews were not practical for the purposes of contacting those in the Deaf community. I could not simply call an individual or organization to speak with a Deaf individual because, obviously, Deaf people cannot have phone conversations. Telecommunication options for Deaf South

Africans are few and far between. Written interviews and correspondence was also sometimes impractical because SASL uses a spatial modality and does not have a written form. For some Deaf individuals, writing long answers to thought-provoking questions is not the easiest task. I would be asking them to communicate in a language that is not the one they are most comfortable with. The language barrier between my potential research participants and I is definitely something to note. It comments on a larger issue of the lack of accessibility for Deaf individuals in the hearing world. Perhaps it also provides some insight into why the Deaf community is as tight-knit as it is

I also put a lot of energy into finding someone to interpret for me during my interviews. There are very few accredited SASL interpreters in South Africa so hiring one for this project would be costly and time-consuming. I simply did not have the time or budget to hire a freelance interpreter. This became a big issue in communicating with the community that this project targets.

I kept coming across barriers in finding people to interview. Whether it be communication barriers or barriers of time and budget, my attempts to set up interviews were usually halted. I contacted two Deaf community organizations by email and I heard back from neither of them. I went to the office of one of these organizations and the person in charge, who I had emailed, wasn't there. After leaving a message at the office I received an email back from him the next day. At this point it was too late to begin the process he told me I must do before an interview. I emailed him back about this time constraint and asked for his guidance on how to move forward. I did not receive a reply. I was also in contact with staff at a school for deaf children but I was not able to reach any Deaf

individuals from my target interviewee demographic through the school. The major barriers to this research were time combined with a lack of response to my contact attempts. When I finally got into contact with an SASL interpreter from a local university she put me in touch with three Deaf individuals to interview. She was also able to interpret for the interviews. I was hoping to have more interviewees for this project but I believe the three that I got shared thoughtful, insightful answers. The interviews were productive and represented different opinions and perspectives. Each of my interviewees had a different ethnic background and a different story of their Deafness. Although I had just a few interviews, I feel that they were productive; perhaps even more than they would have been had I interviewed people from the Deaf organizations.

The identity ranking activity

During my data collection process I wanted my interviews to involve different ways for the interviewees to communicate their opinions. Because communication methods played such a big role in my research I felt that I could not have just one way to find out what these individuals were thinking and feeling. I also wanted to have an activity in the beginning of the interview that would get everyone thinking and reflecting on their identity. Their reflections on their identity are integral to this paper so it was important to allow multiple modalities to allow for the most comfortable, fluid reflection. To incorporate another modality I formatted an “identity ranking” activity. Before the formal interview questions each interviewee was asked to fill out this worksheet that I had made (see Appendix A for a copy of the worksheet). On the worksheet there were seven boxes of different sizes. They went from really big to rather small.

The interviewees were told to write one part of their identity in each box on the worksheet. The biggest boxes were to be filled with the identities that they felt most strongly connected to and that they thought about the most. The smaller boxes were for identities that they think about less and perhaps felt less strongly connected to. At the top of the worksheet were written directions that said, “In the boxes below, write different parts of your identity. In other words, write some things that make you who you are. Fill in one identity per box. In the biggest boxes write the parts of your identity that you feel most strongly connected to and that you think about the most. In the smaller boxes write the parts of your identity that you think about less.” The activity was explained to each interviewee verbally as well as giving them the worksheet with the written directions. An example of a completed worksheet was also provided. After the interviewees completed the activity they were asked to explain each box and why they wrote their identities in that order.

The interview questions

After the identity ranking activity we moved into a question and answer portion of the interviews. There were 11 formal interview questions (see appendix B for list of questions) but these questions often branched off into further questions and conversation. The final question opened up the floor for the interviewee to share anything else they wanted to say on this topic. The questions targeted language use, identity, race and ethnicity. Questions like, “What does the word ‘identity’ mean to you?” and “How would you define ‘race’?” were asked to provide a point of reference to look at as these terms can mean different things to different people and much of this project focuses on identity and race. The

interview questions started out asking about identity in terms of language and Deafness and then moved to questions about race and ethnicity. In the questions I decided to use the word “race” more often than the word “ethnicity”. I believe “ethnicity” might more accurately represent the points I am making and the questions I am asking in this project but I think it would have complicated things during the interviews. I believe that “ethnicity” is a term that may not be a part of everyone’s regular vocabulary and I think that it could cause some confusion when asked about in an interview. My advisor and I also spoke about the potential of “ethnicity” being translated as “race” when my voice was interpreted into SASL for my Deaf interviewees. I spent a lot of time deliberating over the language and word choice I used in my interview questions and my paper overall. I decided that using the term “ethnicity” or the combination “race/ethnicity” was the most accurate way to portray the cultural identities that I refer to in this writing of this paper. I switched to this from using just the term “race” to be more inclusive and I maintain this word choice in my paper. In my interviews, however, I went back to using the term “race” for the sake of mutual understanding for my interviewees and I. It does not take away or change any meaning in my questions.

On using a sign language interpreter

For some of the interviews a sign language interpreter was used. This means that when I would ask a question or make a comment the interpreter would translate this into South African Sign Language (as I spoke). When the interviewee answered or made a comment the interpreter would speak out loud what they were signing. Using an interpreter was a new experience for me. I have

never had a conversation through an interpreter so this added a different element to the interview. I think that in a way it added another checkpoint to make sure I was carefully considering the ethics of my interview. Before we started the interview I asked my interviewee to sign a consent form and the interpreter also signed a consent form because I would be recording her voice and she was present for the interview. For the recording of the interpreted interviews the voice is of the interpreter and not the actual interviewee. The interpreter gave verbal permission for her voice to be recorded. Although introducing another person (the interpreter) to the interview is necessary and brings a lot of positive aspects, it also creates more opportunity for human error. To mitigate any miscommunication between the interviewee and I, the interview took place in more than one modality. We had the questions, which I asked verbally and were interpreted in SASL for the interviewee, and the identity ranking activity, which allowed an opportunity for some basic data to be collected directly without an interpreter.

All professional sign language interpreters, like the one used for these interviews, must sign a code of ethics before practicing. The code outlines the ethics they agree to as interpreters and holds them accountable for translating what is said and signed truthfully. It also holds the interpreter responsible for the confidentiality of the information that they interpret. The interpreter for the interviews in this project is bound by this code of ethics. This adds another layer of insurance that the information I received in these interviews is accurate and representative of what the interviewee said.

On ethics

The most important part of the planning of this research was the ethical considerations. Because this research involves human subjects a lot of thought had to be put into protecting their safety and rights. To maintain high ethical standards consent forms were used, parts of the project were explained several times in different ways, and the choice of language for the interviews was up to the interviewee. One big ethical matter that was always at the forefront of this research project is the issue of the language barrier between English (the language I use) and South African Sign Language (the language that my interviewees use). In a project focusing on SASL, it would be ridiculous to ask SASL users to communicate in a different language if they are most comfortable using SASL. While I was finding participants for this research I was also working diligently to find an interpreter to use. Because of the history of Deaf individuals being forced to speak, it was imperative to have an SASL interpreter available. Thankfully, after a long search, I found an interpreter at the nearby university who was able to interpret for the interviews and she was available for the interviewees who wanted to use SASL. Throughout the entire research and writing process I continue to make ethical considerations. I continue to question my research methods and how I represent the participants in my writing. I believe that continual consideration of ethics is necessary for any responsible research.

Research Findings

The research question posed in this article asks if use of SASL and identity within the Deaf community impact how one identifies with their ethnic/racial group. I argue that it does.

Through the data collection process I held interviews with a diverse array of Deaf individuals who gave me very interesting and poignant answers and thoughts. Their words make up the findings that respond to this article's initial query. The three interviewees that participated in this project have very diverse experiences with Deafness and race. All three are students at the same university. Each interview was held on the campus of the university. As described in the methodology, the interviews consisted of two parts: the written identity ranking activity and the formal questions. Embedded below are copies of each interviewee's identity ranking activity and narratives capturing how each individual explained their identities and the order they chose. In the descriptions I focus on their thoughts on their Deafness and their ethnic/racial identity as that is the main focus of this project. After the narratives about each participant's identity ranking activity is a section combining the findings of the interview questions from all three interviews. Analysis of these findings is woven throughout.

Throughout this whole paper the interviewees will be referred to using pseudonyms. I also use a pseudonym for the name of their university. My first interviewee is Eva*. She is a third year student at University of South Africa*. She is a white woman. She comes from a family of mostly Deaf individuals. She, herself, identifies as Deaf but she has some residual hearing and uses hearing

aids. We spoke in a quiet room for our interview and did not use an interpreter. My second interviewee, Maria*, is also a third year student at University of South Africa. She describes herself as an Indian woman. She was born hearing but became Deaf at a young age, before language acquisition. For our interview we used an SASL interpreter and it took place in a quiet office. My third interviewee is Victor*. He is a law student at University of South Africa. He identifies himself as an African man. He is Deaf and our interview used a combination of writing and speaking. We were not able to have an interpreter due to scheduling mishaps. The interview took place outside in a quiet sitting area on his university's campus.

* name changed

Narratives of Each Participant's Identity Ranking Activity

Eva's identity ranking activity

I meet Eva on a Tuesday morning (April 19th, 2016) at a central coffee shop at her university. As soon as we meet I notice her bubbly personality. She is a very talkative, friendly young woman. She wears a big smile throughout the interview. She takes a few minutes and thoughtfully fills out the identity ranking activity. Below is Eva's identity ranking worksheet.

In the boxes below, write different parts of your identity. In other words, write some things that make you who you are. Fill in one identity per box. In the biggest boxes write the parts of your identity that you feel most strongly connected to and that you think about the most. In the smaller boxes write the parts of your identity that you think about less.

1

Deaf
(3rd generation)

2

Female

3

Student

4

White /
~~Caucasian~~
Caucasian

5

South
African

6

Christian

7

Eldest
Child

“My grandparents on both sides are Deaf. My parents on both sides are Deaf. My aunts and uncles are Deaf. Me, my siblings, my brothers are Deaf. So being Deaf is like the biggest part of who I am. I was born into it, grew up in it.”, says Eva as she begins to explain the first box on her worksheet (Eva, personal communication, April 19th, 2016). The biggest part of Eva’s identity is her Deafness. On the worksheet she includes “3rd generation” under “Deaf”. This

qualifier shows that Deafness is a source of pride and inclusion for Eva and her family. She certainly speaks about her Deafness proudly. Deafness is a big part of her family. It affects the daily life of her whole family (Eva, personal communication, April 19th, 2016). Eva explains how being Deaf has an impact on her life at home. She says, “For my family, we use sign language all the time. We...we behave Deaf at home.” “How do you ‘behave Deaf’?”, I ask her. She replies, “Umm, we wave arms. We stamp the floor. We use light to get people’s attention. Um, we use sign language most of the time...and most of the activities we do is with our hands or the eyes. So we don’t rely on hearing sounds we rely on seeing it. So in interacting with one another it’s gonna be dependent on that, and our sense of touch as well.” (Eva, personal communication, April 19th, 2016). Eva has so much to say about her identity as a Deaf person. It is clearly something that she thinks about a lot. While explaining her worksheet she shares about the conflicts she has had with her Deaf identity. She said, “I’ve had a lot of battles with being Deaf because I speak well. People forget I’m Deaf but then I don’t understand people and keep reminding them I’m Deaf even though I speak well. Umm, yeah so a lot of tension that I’ve experienced is because of my Deafness. People don’t understand or they forget.” (Eva, personal communication, April 19th, 2016). Perhaps the struggles she has faced with her Deaf identity have caused her to hold onto it more strongly.

Eva goes on to explain the rest of the boxes on her worksheet. She talks about being female and how that influences her life. She talks about being a student and how busy that makes her life. She briefly touches on other identities but none in nearly as much detail as her identity as a Deaf individual. Only when

it comes to the fourth box does Eva write her race. It does not seem that she is as involved with her racial identity as she is with her identity as a Deaf person. She is aware of her whiteness and how it affects her life but it is not something she sees as one of the bigger parts of her identity (Eva, personal communication, April 19th, 2016). She says, “Being a white person, well we have to, in South Africa especially, we have to constantly be aware that who you are...you have to be careful with how you interact with other people of different races otherwise you’ll offend them. Or you better understand that you’re where you are because of your race and how the past affects your present.” Eva is well aware of her positionality as a white person but she does not speak about it as something she holds close to her core (Eva, personal communication, April 19th, 2016).

Eva then quickly goes through the rest of the boxes on her worksheet. She talks about being South African and being a Christian. We have a conversation about birth order and she tells me about being an eldest child. There are a lot of identities that Eva claims but Deafness is truly the biggest (Eva, personal communication, April 19th, 2016). I believe that, in a way, it trumps any other identity for her.

Maria’s identity ranking activity

I meet with Maria on a Tuesday morning (April 19th, 2016). She arrives with the SASL interpreter that we will be using for our interview. The interpreter introduces herself then immediately stands directly next to me. This is where she stays for the rest of the interview. Maria is a somewhat reserved individual. She is very willing to help. After I explain the activity she asks if she must fill out

every box. I tell her she does not. She begins filling out the worksheet and stops after box six. Below is Maria's identity ranking activity.

In the boxes below, write different parts of your identity. In other words, write some things that make you who you are. Fill in one identity per box. In the biggest boxes write the parts of your identity that you feel most strongly connected to and that you think about the most. In the smaller boxes write the parts of your identity that you think about less.

1 SASL

Deaf

2 Deaf

~~Indian~~

3 Indian

~~Student~~

4 Student

~~Female~~

5 Female

6 family

7

In the first box of the worksheet Maria writes "SASL". She explains, "I think the main thing that's part of my life is South African Sign Language because of, you know, the language barriers experienced.... I do notice that when I speak in sign language it's easy to, you know, express myself, but when I think

about Afrikaans or isiXhosa it's more difficult. So, you know, I think language is a great part of my life.” (Maria, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Maria is signing everything she says during the interview. She silently signs while the interpreter voices, in English, what Maria is signing. As with many people, her language is a huge part of her life. South African Sign Language is what she uses to communicate every day and in a world that does not necessarily cater to users of SASL, it is something she holds as a big part of who she is (Maria, personal communication, April, 19, 2016).

In the second box on her worksheet, Maria writes “Deaf”. Like Eva, Maria has experienced conflicts because of her Deafness. She says, “In my everyday life I experience being Deaf because I do experience a lot of challenges from since I was born. I’d meet a hearing person, they would talk to me and then I would explain to them that I’m Deaf, and then they’d run away! So it’s like there’s not enough awareness.” (Maria, personal communication, April 19 2016). Maria’s Deafness sometimes causes her to be ostracized by hearing people. Because of this, it is something that she is cognizant of in her daily life (Maria, personal communication, April, 19, 2016). As with many marginalized groups, the marginalization the Deaf community and Maria face makes it hard to for them to forget their Deafness. I suspect that this contributes to why SASL and Deafness are her two “biggest” identities.

When it comes to Maria’s racial identity, she considers it to be different for her than it is for the hearing community. She explains, “To me its like my identity of being Indian is different from the hearing community that are Indian because if I say, ‘yes I’m Deaf and I’m Indian’ to a hearing Indian person, you

know the way they speak... and the culture that they follow... the slang and everything that they use, I won't understand even though they are Indian. But if I'm in the Deaf community with mostly white Deaf people then I feel a part of it; I don't see myself as Indian.” (Maria, personal communication, April, 19, 2016). Maria placed “Indian” in the third box on her sheet but she talks about it as something fairly insignificant to her. She even goes on to explain to me that Indian culture is not something she connects with that much. With Deaf culture, though, Maria feels very connected (Maria, personal communication, April, 19, 2016). When talking to me about being Indian, Maria also shares that she does not always feel welcomed by other Indian students at her university. “At university there's so many students here and when I try to meet with Indian hearing people, you know its like they, even though I study at [university's name], they completely ignore me as being an Indian. And when I'm with white students then I make friends. You know I can connect with them even though I am not white.... Even though we're the same skin color, but their perspective is different toward mine.” (Maria, personal communication, April, 19, 2016).

Afterward Maria explains the rest of her worksheet to me. She talks about being female and a student. She also tells me about her family. As we go through the other boxes, though, Maria continues to talk about her Deafness and South African Sign Language while explaining each of her other identities. From what she says, being Deaf influences Maria's other identities. It is a big part of her life.

Victor's identity ranking activity

After several attempts to find each other, Victor and I finally meet on a Wednesday morning (April 27th, 2016) outside of an academic building at his university campus. He comes running to our meeting place with a smile on his

face. We are without an interpreter for our interview because of schedule changes so we do the interview through typing. I type out some instructions for the activity and I show him an example. He quickly gets started on the worksheet. Below is Victor's identity ranking activity.

In the boxes below, write different parts of your identity. In other words, write some things that make you who you are. Fill in one identity per box. In the biggest boxes write the parts of your identity that you feel most strongly connected to and that you think about the most. In the smaller boxes write the parts of your identity that you think about less.

1 African	2 Deaf	
3 Student	4 Resilient	5 Friendly
6 Christian	7	

In Victor's first box he wrote "African". As he explains why, I can tell that he puts a lot of thought into this identity. He says to me, "Well I'm an African, as you can see (laughs).... I think we have lost ourselves... because

most people have adopted western ideas. We have forgotten African cultures. Our identity, our background, our history... I think we have forgotten it. We tend to follow western ideas about beauty, success... things like that. When you ask an African person what success means for them they are going to talk about material things.... But African people in the past were not like that.... I want to be an African again. An African of the past, a true African. Without western ideas.” (Victor, personal communication, April 27th, 2016). Victor speaks slowly and thoughtfully, explaining to me how he sees his identity as an African and how he wants to live out that identity. He shows me why he placed this identity first (Victor, personal communication, April 27th, 2016). Out of all the interviewees, he is the only one who placed his race before his Deafness in the activity.

Victor writes “African” first but he explains that both being African and Deaf are the biggest parts of his identity. “I never forget to tell people that I am Deaf.” (Victor, personal communication, April 27th, 2016). He had few words to share on his Deafness while he explained his worksheet but I could tell how passionate he is about it. He tells me that most of his friends are Deaf and he usually communicates in South African Sign Language (Victor, personal communication, April 27th, 2016). He also explained to me how it was difficult when he became Deaf. He said, “I was not born deaf I became deaf. And after I became deaf I did not go to school for three years...I think it was a difficulty because I was used to hearing.” (Victor, personal communication, April 27th, 2016). Being Deaf is something that constantly affects his life.

Victor then goes on to explain the other boxes on his worksheet. He tells me about personality traits that make him who he is, like friendliness and resilience. When he gets to the sixth box, where he wrote “Christian”, he laughs

and tells me that he should have put that higher on the list but he forgot. He tells me that, “I believe in God. And I try to follow a God way of life as much as I can.” (Victor, personal communication, April 27th, 2016). Victor’s religion affects multiple aspects of his life as does his race and Deafness.

Findings and analysis of responses to interview questions

In the interviews with each individual one undeniable truth came up: being Deaf was one of the, if not the, most important parts of the identity of these

Quach 25

Deaf individuals. The Deaf identity and identity with South African Sign Language that my interviewees held wove throughout our entire conversations. Even when we weren't speaking specifically about being Deaf, sign language and Deafness came up in their answers. All of the interviewees spoke about their Deafness as the central part of their life. Racial lines that may exist for hearing people did not come up for these Deaf individuals. Many cited South African Sign Language as a unifier amongst Deaf individuals of all races and ethnicities.

There were several common themes that came up in the interviews. These themes all culminate in a general agreement amongst the interviews that SASL and Deafness creates an identity that rises above racial lines. The following themes highlight similarities among the experiences of three interviewees that give even more significance to the findings of this research.

Deaf culture and community

Each interviewee identified as a part of the Deaf community and this came out in the conversations we had. All three individuals explained that the Deaf community has a culture with very distinct characteristics. Membership in the Deaf community rests largely on use of South African Sign Language. There is a thriving Deaf community and there is a lot of pride in being Deaf. The interviewees had a lot of confidence in their Deafness and were eager to explain their culture to me. Victor said:

“We Deaf people have a community of our own. More like a culture. We have a culture.... There is a Deaf culture. Most hearing people don't believe that.... They see us as a disabled group but we see ourselves as a culture. We have our norms and traditions and...personality characteristics, like most Deaf people behave the same way.” (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016)

Both of the other interviewees also explained that the Deaf community has a culture that not everyone else understands. This shared culture could be a contributing factor to the importance that Deaf identity holds for these Deaf individuals. Eva explained some parts of Deaf culture that may be different from hearing culture. She said:

“There are so many things that Deaf community do that hearing people don’t do. So for example we tell each other where we’re going even if it’s to the bathroom. Umm, we look at people in the eyes all the time (laughs) and hearing people get really, like, uneasy with that because they’re not used to looking at someone all the time. Um, yeah, we always go where there’s most light ‘cause then it’s easy to see everyone. So you hardly find Deaf people in groups in a dark area. That sort of thing, it’s just things that we do that people who can hear wouldn’t do.” (Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

There are so many intricate characteristics and cultural norms within Deaf culture that a hearing person may not realize exist. This can be a cause for separation between Deaf individuals and hearing individuals of the same ethnic group. A shared culture creates strong bonds and this is shown by the way these three Deaf individuals feel about their Deaf community.

Conflict breeds connectivity

The Deaf community is a marginalized group. They are a minority language group. Because of this there are barriers that Deaf individuals must face. All of the interviewees had stories of the struggles they’ve experienced due to their Deafness. They shared about inaccessibility, misunderstanding, and communication barriers. They talked about struggles that they face on a regular basis. Maria says, “Being Deaf has a big impact on my life because there’s various aspects to it. It does create language barriers.” (Maria, personal

communication, April 19, 2016). Victor feels like he has a place in the Deaf community. He can be with people that he understands and that understand him.

He said:

“I am part of the Deaf community. I’m pro Deaf. I’m pro Deaf. I’m involved in the Deaf community fully. I’m not part of the hearing community. Like when I’m with hearing people I don’t feel connected. And with two or more hearing people I don’t feel part of it because I cannot lip read two or more people at the same time. I can only manage one person at a time....With Deaf people everything is okay...I can understand everything they are saying. So I feel more connected with the Deaf community.” (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016).

The conflicts that these individuals experience with being Deaf creates an environment that causes them to become more connected to their own community of Deaf individuals. Because they’ve sometimes felt ostracized from the hearing community it drives them to put their Deaf identity in a place of importance (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016).

South African Sign Language as a first language

Such a big part of the Deaf community is the language. Sign language and Deaf identity go hand in hand. All of the interviewees for this project consider South African Sign Language to be their first language or their pseudo-first language. Because language is so tied to identity their connection to SASL would be a huge contributor to shaping what parts of their identity that they hold closest. Eva says, “Firstly sign language is my home language but we read and write in English. So then we end up being bilingual, most of us. Um, so my family, we read and write English but when we talk to each other we use sign language.” (Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Eva’s whole family is Deaf and

they all use SASL to communicate. It is the language of her home and family. Victor's situation is a bit different. Technically, the first language that Victor knew was isiXhosa. It is the language he uses with his family (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016). However, he feels a deep connection with SASL that almost overtakes the place of Xhosa. He said:

“I feel connected to sign language....It's not my first language...because my first language is Xhosa, but I feel as that is was my first language because I can't survive without it. My feelings say that sign language is my first language because it's the language I use most of the day.” (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016)

Indeed SASL is the language that all of my interviewees use for most of the day. Their lectures are interpreted into SASL, they have Deaf friends and family, and they have interpreters available for other school events. Even though Victor uses Xhosa at home, the language that works the best for him is sign language. It's a language that does not leave him feeling left out (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016). It must be draining to be surrounded by languages that are inaccessible to you. These Deaf individuals experience this on a daily basis. Because of this, having a language that is suited to you must be even more significant. This contributes to feelings of belonging in the Deaf community over an ethnic community. Victor speaks both Xhosa, the language of his ethnic group, and SASL, the language of the Deaf community. Although Xhosa is the language his family and ethnic community speak he still considers SASL to be a bigger part of his life proving the power of SASL in shaping identity (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016).

What do you think about “race”?

When asked broadly about the term “race” and what they thought of it all three interviewees had a mixture of negative and cynical responses. They seemed to speak about race at a distance as if it was something that other people talk and think about, although they were aware of how it affects their lives. There was almost an annoyance at the existence of the term. When asked about it Eva exclaimed:

“(laughs) Race is literally made up. There’s no such thing as race! You know, it shapes so much of our history, unfortunately... For me it’s interesting that for me historically I’m from Belgian, Dutch, and French backgrounds but we...now in this generation we only see ourselves as white. But what is white?” (Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

Victor spoke about his hatred of the word “race”. He also shared his thoughts on racism and how it operates in society. He said:

“I even hate the word ‘race’. I hate it....I don’t think people are actually racist. They are more, like, protecting privilege. If that means fighting against another race, they do it. It’s more like protecting privilege....I don’t think it’s really hating people. It’s protecting privilege.... You will do everything in your power to protect what you have.” (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016).

Maria had a more apathetic view on “race”. She said that race means nothing to her (Maria, personal communication, April 19, 2016). She called herself Indian but she said she doesn’t identify with it. She doesn’t have any strong connection to any racial or ethnic group (Maria, personal communication, April 19, 2016). These individuals had a realistic view of how race affects themselves and their society but they talked about it in a much more nonchalant way than I’d expect. They spoke about it like it was just an unnecessary annoyance. This was curious

to me. Is it really that race and ethnicity has so much smaller of a significance within the small cultural community of the Deaf? Perhaps it is so.

Differences within the Deaf community

Although these interviews provided some evidence that the Deaf community may be some utopian group, unaffected by race or ethnicity, this is not entirely true. Yes, from what these interviewees said, there are a lot of similarities that exist among Deaf individuals. A lot of times, these similarities may even trump other differences, such as the culture of their ethnic group, that exist between Deaf people. However, there are differences that do exist within the Deaf community. Some are harmless and some are not so harmless. Eva was explaining to me the way that one's culture in their ethnic group can affect the way they sign. There are different dialects within SASL and sometimes when two Deaf people come together they will compare signs to see on what signs they differ (Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016). She explained to me this interesting example of differences within SASL:

“Also culture comes into play like some of us will sign ‘dinner’ as if eating with knife and fork (holds up both hands with only pointer and middle finger up and mimes using them as silverware) and maybe in the African community they’re culture is to eat with their hands with pap so they’re sign for dinner would be like this (holds hand up with all five fingers straightened and brought together as if to pick something up. Mimes picking up food and putting it in mouth.) So then the differences really depend on your other identities so you could say, based on my observation that I’ve looked on for so long, is that sometimes the dialect [of sign language] is dependent on your race but ultimately we like to say it’s South African Sign Language.” (Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

Eva's anecdote illustrated a harmless instance where SASL and ethnicity intersect. She also shared, though, an example of how race and ethnicity intersects with Deafness in a not so harmless way. She said:

“The way that race can impact your experience as a Deaf person is the socioeconomic status. So, unfortunately, what I see a lot happening is that those in the poor coloured or black communities who are Deaf often have a more painful experience in terms of getting access to hearing aids, speech therapy, audiologist, hearing aid batteries, schools, level of education... So for them their race often determines how they experience being Deaf... Whereas someone who's white with a privileged background you have easy access to all the things you need being a Deaf person. So I think maybe in terms of access and resources that would be the issue determined by race.” (Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The realities of race and socioeconomic status in this country affect everyone, including the Deaf community. There are inequalities that exist for those of certain racial groups and social classes and, as Eva pointed out, these affect Deaf individuals as well. Despite these differences, the individuals that I spoke to maintained their strong Deaf identity over anything else. Maybe on an individual basis, race and ethnicity still mean a lot less to Deaf individuals.

Deafness versus [insert ethnicity here]

Bringing it back to the initial sentiment stated in the title of this paper, the interviewees had firm and consistent beliefs on whether they identify more strongly with the Deaf community or their racial/ethnic group. All called themselves “Deaf” before any other identity. There are differences in the way they identify with their ethnic group than the way non-Deaf people do (Maria, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Victor says he sees himself much more

as a Deaf person than and African (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016). He said, “You see, the first thing that I tell people is that I’m Deaf. And when I’m in a group of people, people of all backgrounds, all colors, I see myself as Deaf. Not as an African.” (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016). Speaking on the broader Deaf community, Victor says, “We deaf people identify ourselves not in terms of race, but in terms of our membership in the Deaf community.... We are primarily Deaf before all else.” (Victor, personal communication, May 2, 2016). So Deaf people are Deaf and race, ethnicity, and everything else is an afterthought.

All of the interviewees said that, when given a choice, they would be more likely to connect with and make friends with a Deaf person of any race/ethnicity than a hearing person of their same ethnic group (Maria, Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Maria stated that she tends to socialize with more white people even though she, herself, is not white. She said that she does not feel a big connection to Indian culture (Maria, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Eva also spoke about a lack of cultural identity with her racial group. She, as well as other interviewees, insinuated that this lack of connection to a racial or ethnic group might not exist as much for hearing people. She said:

“I don’t really have white culture. The only whiteness I have is probably speaking English. But my identity, my behavior, the way I do things, is because I’m Deaf. So being white isn’t exactly shaping me as much as maybe people who are not Deaf would. So I’m not strongly connected with whiteness.” (Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

We have certainly seen that among Deaf people, many racial and ethnic barriers are diminished. So does race/ethnicity come into play at all with the Deaf community? Eva said:

“I think sometimes race can play a secondary impact or role as a Deaf person ‘cause often the fact that you speak sign language or you can or cant hear sounds that’s you’re most dominant identity because it determines your experience in everyday life and then race would be second.” (Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

So race and ethnicity still have somewhat of an impact within the Deaf community but it’s importance pales in comparison to Deaf identity.

When Deaf people are together, race/ethnicity is not much of an issue (Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

We have certainly seen that these Deaf individuals identify more strongly with being Deaf than with their race and that their ethnic identity seems to be different from their hearing counterparts but how does language come into play? South African Sign Language is perhaps the most important part of Deaf culture (Eva, personal communication, April 19, 2016). South African Sign Language is a means for these connections between Deaf individuals of all ethnicities (Maria, personal communication, April 19, 2016). With all of this evidence I would argue that SASL is a driving factor in the connection of Deaf individuals to Deaf identity over ethnic identity. Victor cited sign language as something that Deaf people of all races have in common. He said, “There are white Deaf people and black Deaf people. They use the same language. They feel connected to Deaf identity and Deaf culture in a similar way. They sign

the same way. They behave the same way.” (Victor, personal communication, April 27, 2016). Maria shared this sentiment. She talked about how Deaf individuals of different ethnic groups may have different languages that they use “on their lips” but in the end they all use South African Sign Language. She said:

“What they do on their lips might be Afrikaans or Zulu or whatever but the signs is something that I understand so it don’t matter what they use on their lips. So even though I use English on my lips we can still communicate so I feel that race, for the Deaf community, it doesn’t matter ‘cause SASL is a unified thing that all of us use.” (Maria, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

So ultimately South African Sign Language and being a part of the Deaf community has a definite impact on the ethnic and racial identities of these three Deaf individuals.

Conclusion

The initial question of this paper was “Does use of SASL and identity within the Deaf community impact how one identifies with their racial or ethnic group?” and I believe a conclusion has been reached. Of course no definite statements can be made in response to this question but in terms of this study and the three individuals that I spoke with, use of SASL and Deaf identity does impact racial/ethnic identity. These Deaf individuals felt much more connected to their Deaf identity than their ethnic group. They explained that they believed their ethnic identity was different from their hearing counterparts. All of the interviewees spoke about their connection to SASL and how SASL unifies the Deaf community. They felt that this linguistic bond was bigger than any ethnic or racial barriers. It was interesting to give attention to South African Sign

Language in the framework of language in South Africa. There are so many languages in South Africa and so much significance can be given to language in the history of the country. It is important to now have a small understanding of how sign language fits into the intersectionality of language and race. This study looked at the differences of these intersections between South African Sign Language and other languages in South Africa.

In this study I set out to learn more about a language and community that I had little knowledge on. I set out to hear the stories and thoughts of members of this community and I set out to gain some conclusions to my curiosities. I believe that this study has done all of these things. From my reading and my interviews I was able to find an answer to the initial question, even if that answer is on a small scale. The individuals that I spoke to were able to share about their identity and their culture. I hope that this sparks someone else's interest in learning about a community and language that may sometimes be overlooked in the broader conversation.

Recommendations for further study

I think that further study in this area would be a positive and interesting contribution to the knowledge base surrounding South African Sign Language and the Deaf community. I think it is important to get the voices and stories of the Deaf community, as with any marginalized community, out there. South African Sign Language is an under researched language and I think it is important for more people know about the language and the community that uses it.

Glossary of Terms

SASL- South African Sign Language

Oralism- method of communication and instruction in deaf schools that involves using lip-reading and speech to learn and communicate. This method was seen as the superior method of education for many years and still is considered that by some people and schools.

Manualism- method of communication and instruction in deaf schools that involves using signs and sign systems to learn and communicate. This method was seen as inferior to oralism for many years and was taboo.

Appendix A- Identity Ranking Activity

In the boxes below, write different parts of your identity. In other words, write some things that make you who you are. Fill in one identity per box. In the biggest boxes write the parts of your identity that you feel most strongly connected to and that you think about the most. In the smaller boxes write the parts of your identity that you think about less.

1

2

3

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Appendix B- Interview Questions*

1. What does the word “identity” mean to you?
2. Would you describe yourself as a Deaf person?
3. What would you describe as your “first language”?
4. Other than SASL, are there any other languages that you feel connected to in some way? If yes, why?
5. Does using SASL make you feel connected to the Deaf community? If yes, how?
6. How would you define “race”?
7. What racial group do you see yourself as a part of?
8. Do you feel strongly connected to this racial group?
9. What would you say has a bigger impact on your life: being Deaf or being [insert race/ethnicity they described themselves as]? Why?
10. Would you say SASL impacts your identity?
11. Do you have any more comments, stories, or thoughts to share about this topic?

* wording of questions may have been altered slightly during the interviews

Appendix C- Consent Form

SIT Study Abroad

a program of World Learning



CONSENT FORM

1. Brief description of the purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to explore how South African Sign Language (SASL), as a main method of communication, operates as an identity shaper for some Deaf individuals. I will look at how the language is a means for membership within the sociocultural Deaf community and how use of South African Sign Language can influence and work with Deaf individuals' other identities, particularly ethnic/racial identity. I would like to see how the Deaf community having a strong connection to South African Sign Language is alike or different to ethnic groups in South Africa having a strong connection with their language.

2. Rights Notice

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please take some time to carefully read the statements provided below.

- a. **Privacy** - all information you present in this interview and activity may be recorded and safeguarded. If you do not want the information recorded, you need to let the interviewer know.
- b. **Anonymity** - all names in this study will be kept anonymous unless the participant chooses otherwise.
- c. **Confidentiality** - all names will remain completely confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. By signing below, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents. The interviewer will also sign a copy of this contract and give it to the participant.

Participant's name printed

Participant's signature and date

Interviewer's name printed

Interviewer's signature and date

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Consent to Use of Independent Study Project (ISP)

Student Name: _____ Leanna Quach _____

Title of ISP: Deaf or [insert ethnicity here]? The impact of South African Sign Language and Deaf community membership on the ethnic identities of three Deaf students in Cape Town

Program and Term: ____South Africa: Multiculturalism and Human Rights Spring 2016_____

1. When you submit your ISP to your Academic Director, World Learning/SIT Study Abroad would like to include and archive it in the permanent library collection at the SIT Study Abroad program office in the country where you studied and/or at any World Learning office. Please indicate below whether you grant us the permission to do so.

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Student Signature: _____ Leanna Quach _____ Date: _____ May 4th, 2016 _____